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ABSTRACT

This digest considers four questions about the academic deanship. The first is what are deans and what do they do? The position of dean did not gain universal acceptance in U.S. higher education until 1913. Deans continue to be predominantly white and male, and are generally in their mid-fifties. Strong scholarly credentials distinguish most deans, but the ambiguity of the position they hold, being concerned with students and a wide array of administrative tasks, raises their levels of work-related stress. A second question involves the challenges deans face, with include financial constraints, shifting demographics and increasing diversity of students, demands from the corporate sector, and advances in technology. The third question concerns the strategies deans might use to meet the challenges of higher education today. Deans should use strategies that move them from being managers of day-to-day operations to being leaders in a dynamic environment. Some specific suggestions are offered to enable deans to cope with contemporary challenges, including those of student diversity. A final question asks what universities can do to help deans become more effective. (Contains 15 references.) (SLD)

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The Changing Nature of the Academic Deanship

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The leadership linchpin that holds an organization together lies midway between those perceived as leaders and those upon whose work the reputation of the organization rests. In universities today, academic deans fill this role (Austin, Ahearn, & English, 1997b; Dibden, 1968; Gould, 1964). This monograph provides a compilation of scholarly literature written about academic deans. The premise upon which it builds suggests that changes external to the academy have affected the nature of the academic deanship and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). With this in mind, the authors seek to answer four questions about academic deans: Who are they and what do they do? What challenges do they face? What strategies might they use to meet these challenges? What can universities do to help deans become more effective?

Who Are They and What Do They Do?

While the deanship's lineage can be traced back to medieval universities, its emergence in U.S. universities is a relatively recent phenomenon (Dibden, 1968); Gould, 1964; Griffiths & McCarthy, 1980; Tucker & Bryan, 1988). It was not until 1913 that the position gained universal acceptance (Bowker, 1982; Deferrari, 1956; Gould, 1964). The profile of deans over time has changed slightly but still remains predominantly white and male. Deans continue to be about the same age, in their mid-fifties. They are married and have been in their positions five to six years, on average.

Strong scholarly credentials distinguish most deans. Early on, presidents selected deans directly from faculty ranks. Today, the majority are selected by a committee of faculty and administrators. More than 60% have been department chairs, with the clearest career trajectories manifesting themselves in colleges of liberal arts at research universities. Their [illegible]ies have moved, over time, from being almost exclusi[illegible] student focused to include a multifaceted array of roles, such as budgeting and fundraising, personnel and work environment management, program oversight, and external public relations. As a result, deans experience increasing amounts of ambiguity and conflict, which raise their levels of work-related stress.

What Challenges Do They Face?

Deans come to the position, for the most part, underprepared to deal with strained fiscal resources, externally imposed accountability pressures, demand for relevant curricula and programs, technology advancement and educational delivery, faculty ill-equipped to meet student and system demands, diversity, and professional and personal imbalance. They receive the charge to lead change in the face of shifting demographics of students, changing political and economic attitudes, demands placed on them by the corporate sector, and rapid advancements in technology.

Currently, greater numbers of students who are more diverse than ever before attend college. These students expect faculty to engage them in learning activities that incorporate technology and relate to the workplace. And, they expect to have mentors in the faculty and administration who look like them and will be committed to supporting their educational efforts. At the same time, competing social problems, such as crime,

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racial inequality, and health and welfare, make it difficult for institutions of higher education to secure a significant portion of available public funds. And, increasingly, the corporate sector has signaled its disillusionment with the quality of preparation members of the workforce receive at colleges. Simultaneously, businesses engage in research partnerships where patenting and dissemination restrictions could limit academic freedom. Finally, technological advancements that change daily create a constant need for higher education to keep current. These advancements help drive curricular reform in terms of both content and delivery.

What Strategies Might They Use to Meet These Challenges?

Universities expect deans to lead their colleges. To do so, deans must ensure that their colleges realize university missions in terms of instruction and research. The authors offer an overall strategy—one that moves deans as managers of day-to-day operations to deans as leaders in a dynamic environment. In addition, they offer six specific strategies that relate to persistent challenges: create a diverse culture, know the legal environment, become technologically connected, strategically manage and secure financial resources, seek and maintain professional and personal balance, and nurture the integrity of your college. Diversity strategies focus on the assessment of college history, policies and procedures, the college's psychological climate, and the behaviors of people within it. Strategies that relate to legal issues deal with laws that pertain to discriminatory student admissions and faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion practices; academic freedom; and students' expectations for program quality. A final section suggests how deans might go about instilling a culture of ethical practice within their colleges. Technology strategies seek solutions to issues of student learning and education delivery, personnel productivity, and the use of fiscal resources. Funding strategies address two areas—fiscal management and resource procurement. Balance strategies help deans strike a balance between their professional and personal lives, scholarship and leadership, and long-term agendas and short-term tasks. These strategies help deans take control of their agendas through time, boundary, and stress management. College integrity has to do with how the general public perceives its colleges and universities. It hinges on the success universities have in building alliances with people and organizations in a fashion that fulfills recognizable public needs. Deans can take several approaches to this endeavor—redefining faculty work, reframing academic departments, refocusing department chairs, reconnecting colleges with communities, and revisiting the concept of change leadership.

What Can Universities Do to Help Deans Become More Effective?

Universities provide the broader context within which deans succeed or fail (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Thiessen & Howey, 1998). As such, universities have a role to play in ensuring that their deans lead well. The final section provides ideas that can help universities further the leadership abilities of their deans. Its components include selection, socialization, development, and evaluation. A final topic, rethinking the position, piques the imagination.

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